

Case Study on an Aria Rodelinda

Introduction to Case Study

What is Aria?

Aria, an Italian word, meaning 'air' or 'tune', has been used since the 16th century to describe, most frequently, a musical vocal solo piece in an opera, cantata or an oratorio. Such a piece would carry a story and would normally be accompanied by music.

While operas, cantatas and oratorios consist of a series of arias, which form a part of a story, an aria is also often performed as an individual music performance and sung as a solo piece. Over the previous centuries, arias have gained a lot of popularity across the World, due to their melodic decorations, translation of emotions, and the artistry they present themselves with.

In order to transfer the intended emotions and articulations to the listener, it is imperative for the performer to possess suitable vocal timbre for the intended aria as well as understand the original language the aria is performed in.

Case Study Aria: Mio Caro Bene

History

This essay will consist of a case study conducted on a beautiful aria named 'Mio Caro Bene'.

It originates from an Italian opera seria called 'Rodelinda' which comprises of three acts, composed by George Frederick Handel (Handel G, 1876). The libretto of the opera was written by Nicola Francesco Haym (1678- 1729), but the story is based on the 7th century king of the Lombards. (Schäffer, 1876) The original opera is scored for two recorders, flute, oboes, bassoon, two horns, strings, cello, flute and harpsichord. (Handel G, 1876). It was first performed in London on the 13 February 1725. This aria is in the final part of the reconciliation scene between Rodelinda, her husband Bertarido, and their son Flavio.

An interesting historical note found in the 1876 edition of the full score of the opera states: "The remarkably full figuration is a later addition to the conducting score only", it was written by Handel himself evidently intended to serve as a guide to an unskilled accompanist whom he had to employ at the production of the opera". (Leipzig, Jan 15, 1876).

Musical Analyses; Recitative & Aria

The aria starts with a short recitative, which works as an introductory prologue to the performance and it sets the tone of the forthcoming aria for the audience. The Italian lyrics 'Sposo ti stringo al sen abbraccia al Figlio!', translates to 'husband, I press you to my heart; embrace your son!' (taken from the IPA translation). The tonality is in B harmonic minor and this recitative is a short speech, with only chord accompaniment to assist the performer in maintaining the correct key. The rhythm is uneven throughout, the upbeat or anacrusis on each note creates an abrupt and unsettled feel. When looking at the score in a little more detail one can notice four very short phrases. But having said that, a singer can easily change it by singing in three short phrases thus allowing the music to flow more beautifully towards the end. Singers have a degree of flexibility and certain freedom necessary to change the rhythms of recitatives and therefore enable better breath control.

'Mio Caro Bene' begins immediately after the recitative in G major key with an Allegro tempo marking, which introduces a sense of vibrant imagery for the listener, and thus creates an uplifting atmosphere. The accompaniment has been thoughtfully arranged from the original orchestral score to fortepiano, keeping the main components that makes the accompaniment sound rich and vibrant. It has beautiful melodies reflecting a joyous scene where Rodelinda, her husband Bertorido and their son Figlio are to be reunited.

Rodelinda starts the Aria with the ascending perfect 5th interval from g4 to d5 and with the lyrics 'Mio caro bene,' which translates to 'my dear one'. The second ascending

interval that follows the phrase is an octave of g4 to g5 in bar eleven. It appears that the singer is imitating the melodic line of the aforementioned piano introduction and allows for the continuation of the uplifting and vibrant atmosphere with the addition of vocal coloratura ornamentations. This goes beautifully hand in hand with the lyrics and the plot of the opera, reminding us how magnificent and breathtaking Handel's compositions are.

To examine the musical form of this aria one can notice that it consists of ABA, where A is repeating each time with variations. In Sonata, the form of classical era ABA would be considered as a ternary form. But if we take into consideration the Baroque era of the composition of the aria it was known as da capo aria (literally 'from the head') (Aria - Wikipedia, 2022). At the beginning of each section, it almost feels like an ongoing dialogue between the instrument and the voice. The piano accompaniment and the singer continue this melodic imitation throughout the aria. Those ascending intervals of perfect 5th and perfect octaves are dominating the music whereas the passing notes between the ascending perfect 5th interval and the ascending octave interval seem to be less accented. In summary, this notation makes the melody of the aria more prominent and memorable.

It is evident that all earlier mentioned sections are followed by coloratura ornamentations. The most suitable voice type for this would be a lyrical soprano equipped with great breath control and flexibility for agile leaps and trills.

The ornamentations in this aria are presented with fast moving semiquavers with the highest notes being A5 and the lowest A4. There is a mixture of wide interval leaps in

contrast with smoothly connected notes moving swiftly in tempo allegro. In order to sing this ornamentation precisely and beautifully there are various vocal exercises to help with those passages. Each singer chooses their own most suitable and helpful approach to these vocal exercises. Personally, the one exercise that I found really helpful was advised during our master class by a vocal coach. This was to sing the ornaments with one vowel in legato and with syncopated rhythms. I found this exercise to be the most suitable, resulting in more clearly sung ornaments. Musical analyses on the B section of the aria starts with the lyrics 'vedendoti contento' with literal IPA translation 'seeing you happy'. The music dramatically changes in this section. I would say this is a melodically beautiful part that has a slower feel, despite the tempo Allegro remains. The reason it feels as if the tempo is slower is because the music consists of lots of quavers and three crotchets in a space of three bars and it is important to note that six of those quavers are same note. When the lyrical melody of section B is sung, the aria immerses itself back into ornamentation. And then there is da capo, coming back to sing A section with added trills, melismas for the ornamentation variety.

Ornamentation

The development of ornamentation in today's musical culture has been somewhat influenced by the restraint of the modern customs surrounding performance, though its more limitless use in history is apparent. It can be described as a natural instinct of humans to artistically alter a melody by changing its inner rhythm and include a variety of tones, as manifestations of this sort appear throughout history. However, even in

modern times, where such restraints are relaxed, for example in jazz, this instinct continues to flourish. Leopold Mozart described the human tendency to ornament as a 'force of nature' and stated that even a peasant 'cannot help but adorn his peasant song with graces' (Neumann, 1978). In summary, in vocal music the term 'Ornamentation' means to decorate singing. The decorations can be both melodic and rhythmic. They are also known as 'colorature' or 'melisma'. Fast phrasings and melisma's are often used in world music, gospel music and many operas. 2022. Finally to compare other beautiful arias in Baroque era, which also have ornaments is the beautiful aria by Handel 'Lascia ch'io pianga' from opera Rinaldo and 'Cara Speme questo core' from opera Giulio Cesare (1724) (Aria: Cara speme questo core pdf Sheet music, 2022). These two arias present themselves with beautiful melisma's and ornaments allowing a singer flexibility to improvise.

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